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ABSTRACT

A number of hypotheses have been advanced to explain why black students lag behind whites in school achievement. In the 1950s and 1960s, an environmental hypothesis emerged which attributed the achievement gap to environment. Environmentalists at this point were divided between those who felt the family determined achievement and those who felt the school was responsible. The segregation hypothesis held that racial differences in academic success could be addressed by creating environments in which students from diverse groups were free to interact and learn together. Embodied in the "Brown" decision, this idea is presently under criticism for having failed to bring about satisfactory educational equality. Another environmental theory, based on a notion of cultural deprivation, argued that the family was the most important factor in determining school success. Compensatory education programs are based on this notion, which withstood attacks by the insupportable, discredited genetic theories of Jensen and Shockley. The Coleman Report of 1966 strengthened the deprivation hypothesis, and led to the widespread introduction of school busing, but this report was criticized by Christopher Jencks, who argued that most compensatory efforts are ineffective. In the late sixties, the cultural-difference theory was introduced. It is said that the culture of the school (school climate) must be reformed to make it more congruent with the diverse cultures of minority students. This development resulted in the concept of multi-ethnic education, which had its heyday in the 1970s. Today, multicultural education is challenged by economic cutbacks and ideological shifts. Finally, the recent effective schools hypothesis argues that schools do have a great impact on student achievement. Criteria for identifying effective schools have been advanced, and have served as a basis for various school improvement programs. In conclusion, it has been argued, any hypothesis chosen to guide the education of minorities must reflect the American values of equality, justice, and human dignity. (KH)

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BUILDING A BRIDGE TO SPAN THE MINORITY-MAJORITY ACHIEVEMENT GAP

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Presented at the
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Building A Bridge to Span the
Minority-Majority Achievement Gap

Sixteen years after major school desegregation initiatives and nineteen years after the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 the achievement test scores of Black-American students are beginning to catch up with those of white students. Lyle V. Jones, professor of psychology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says this trend which was first reported in 1981 is now beginning to show up in college and graduate school admissions tests. In addition Jones examined data from the latest National Assessment of Educational Progress and found that even though the achievement gap is still sizable it is continuing to shrink (Walton, 1983). How will we continue to narrow this gap is important. We need to begin our journey by examining the various signposts of the past that bridged the differences among groups of people.

Regardless of the fact that the achievement gap between black and white students is beginning to narrow, the three decade old controversy as to why the gap exists continues. Since the early 1950's scholars, social scientists, psychologists, and educators have attempted to determine the cause of the achievement gap and the appropriate educational programs and policies for reducing the gap. Let us examine these roadblocks and understand the causes of the gaps in achievement.

One of the hypotheses which emerged in the 1950's and 1960's was that the achievement gap was environmentally determined.

This is the first signpost on the bridge that we need to explore. The environmentalists were divided at this time into two camps. The first were those educators and social scientists who believed that the environmental causes could be addressed by changing the environment of the school. On the other side of the issue were those environmentalists who felt that the pattern of a child's achievement was fundamentally determined by the family and that the schools had little impact.

In the 1950's, the segregation hypothesis emerged. It maintained that schools could and should provide educational equality by creating environments in which students from diverse groups were free to interact and learn together (Banks, 1983). This view was most dramatically stated by the Supreme Court Justices' answer to the question posed by Chief Justice Earl Warren: "'Does the segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other 'tangible' factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities?'" The unanimous opinion was, "'To separate Negro school children from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone (Foster, 1983).'" We have come a great distance on this bridge since the 1954 decision, Brown v. Topeka.

Three decades later the efforts of those who believed that the elimination of racial segregation in the schools would bring about educational equality is under attack on a variety of fronts. Some individuals, like Derell Bell who worked for desegregation as a lawyer for both public and private civil rights agencies, now feel that school desegregation efforts have exhausted their potential for improving the quality of schooling. He gives one reason in that even in the south where millions of students attend desegregated schools, few of the schools show black achievement scores equal to those of white students. Besides this fact he secondly states, that the concentration of poor blacks in large urban areas makes efforts to achieve racial balance virtually impossible (Bell, 1983). Is this plausible or is it political rhetoric?

Another factor working against further efforts to achieve educational equality through the elimination of segregation is the shift in the public mood which began in the mid-1970's. In 1974 the Supreme Court, in Milliken v. Bradley, overruled the decision of a lower court which ordered black schools in Detroit to be consolidated into a single district with the white suburbs. In his dissent, Thurgood Marshall summarized the Supreme Court's decision by stating, "'Today's holding, I fear, is more a reflection of a perceived public mood that we have gone far enough in enforcing the Constitution's guarantees of equal justice than it is the product of neutral principles of law.'" This shift in public mood as reflected by the federal

government's policies has become even more apparent in the 1980's. Since President Reagan took office, the Justice Department has not filed a single desegregation suit (Foster, 1983).

A second environmental hypothesis as to why minority students perform poorly in school was that of cultural deprivation which emerged in the 1960's. The educators who subscribed to the deprivation theory, like the integrationists, are environmentalists who believe that schools can create educational equality by "intervening in the lives of poor youths at the earliest possible age and providing them with a rich and stimulating educational environment (Banks, 1983)." Underlying the theory of deprivation and modern compensatory education programs is Piaget's theory that a child who, at an early age, is deprived of appropriate environmental stimuli lacks the experiences needed for the development of intellectual skills and abilities (Ornstein, 1982).

Based on the deprivation theory a national commitment was made to compensate for this lack of an appropriately stimulating environment by the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965. As a result large amounts of federal funds were used for programs such as Head Start and Title I. The proponents of compensatory education believed that "proper schooling for disadvantaged children could compensate for the inadequacies of the total environment (Stickney and Plunkett, 1982)."

In 1979 the federal government spent about $1.5 billion on more than 1.5 million children; however, the impact that compensatory education programs have had on raising student achievement is still being debated. After an extensive analysis of research and literature related to compensatory education, Stephen P. Mullin, research associate in the Department of Economics at the University of Pennsylvania, and Anita A. Summers, a professor of public management in the Wharton School of Business, determined that compensatory education has accomplished the following: 1) participants have some slight edge over nonparticipants, 2) effects are not sustained, and that 3) more dollars are not cost-effective. Their most consistent finding was related to the effectiveness of parent involvement and places the burden outside the school system (Mullin and Summers, 1983). Ironically the new legislation for Title I, now Chapter I, of the ESEA is contained in the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act of 1981 and virtually eliminates the parental involvement portion of the previous legislation (Stickney and Plunkett, 1982). Let us put back this provision in the legislative law.

In the late 1960's the genetic explanation for the low achievement of minority chidren was revitalized by Arthur Jensen and William Shockley. In an article published in the Winter 1969 issue of the Harvard Educational Review Jensen states that it is "not an unreasonalbe hypothesis that genetic factors are strongly implicated in the average Negro-white intelligence difference." In his article Jensen goes on to blame the failure of

compensatory education programs on the fact that they are attempting to compensate children of limited intellectual ability with concepts and skills geared to the child of average or above average ability (Jensen, 1969). His hypothesis has never become a theory of worth. It should be discredited.

Not only did the genetic theory undermine the efforts of compensatory education programs in the late 1960's, another environmental theory was just as critical. In 1966 the controversial Coleman Report which had been commissioned by President Johnson to help increase the federal commitment to education was released. Based on the data gathered, James Coleman of Harvard concluded that the single most important variable in determining a child's academic achievement was the educational and social background of the child's family. The second most important factor was the educational and social background of the child's peer group. This report was a major proponent to the development of busing as a solution to narrowing the minority-majority gap.

In a study which included a reanalysis of the Coleman Report, Christopher Jencks, a professor from Harvard, concluded that:

> 1) the schools did very little to close the gap between the rich and the poor, the "disadvantaged" and "advantaged" learner (but they can try); 2) the quality of education had little effect on what happens to students (future income) after they graduate; 3) school achievement depends largely on a single input, that is, cognitive skill; 4) background is the most important

determinant of educational attainment, and all other variables are either secondary or irrelevant; 5) there is little evidence that school reform (such as compensatory spending or racial or social-class integration) can substantially reduce cognitive inequality as determined by biased test scores among students; 6) hence, the achievement of complete economic equality regardless of ability would require actual redistribution of income (Ornstein, 1982).

Since this report was published in 1972, Jencks and his colleagues have continued their study and research on the effect of family background on a child's educational achievement. In a later report published in 1979 his conclusions were basically unchanged: most compensatory education efforts are ineffective (Ornstein, 1982).

An important breakthrough on bridging the achievement gap is the cultural-difference theory, also emerged during the late 1960's and the early 1970's. The scholars and researchers who support this hypothesis reject the views of the geneticists and cultural deprivationists and argue that the culture of the school (school climate) must be reformed to make it more congruent with the diverse cultures of minority students. This is based on the belief that the prevailing culture of the school is alien to most minority students and in some cases actually is in conflict with the home culture of the student.

In the late 1960's the cultural-difference theory was translated into multiethnic education, which proposed that the heritage of ethnic minorities be accurately reflected in the school curricula. The ideological premise of multiethnic education was that ethnicity would ultimately shape and change human behavior, values, and attitudes; and, that if schools hoped to realize their goal of providing educational equality then it was imperative that ethnic and cultural pluralism be adopted as part of the curriculum in the education of all student.

The hey-day of multiethnic education was in the 1970's. The educational and social climates in the United States educational arena were open to change and positive innovation. In addition, the legal precederts sustained the legitimacy of multiethnic education. The Lau decision promoted bilingual education for all minorities, while the Ethnic Heritage Program (ESEA) provided funding for research into curriculum design and the dissemination of programs related to ethnic minorities. During this period goals of multiethnic education expanded to include the clarification of attitudes and values to promote respect for the culturally pluralistic nature of our society. It was a healthy period of change which continues today. As an outgrowth of this change, multiethnic education evolved and broadened to become in 1979 multicultural education. "Three essential ideological orientations emerged: teaching ethnically different students differently, using insights into ethnic pluralism to improve all education decision-making, and teaching content about ethnic groups to all students (Gay, 1983)."

During the 1980's multicultural education faces a variety of challenges which may threaten its future. First, there is a severe economic challenge. In a time when schools are facing budgetary restraints and cut-backs, relatively new programs such as multicultural education may still be viewed as an adjunct to the total curriculum. This program tends to be one of the first to lose state funding. The second challenge is an ideological one. "The current societal and educational emphases on basics, conservatism, fundamentalism, and the cost-effectiveness of human services are not conducive to educational ideas that run counter to the status quo (Gay, 1983)."

In addition to the economic and ideological challenges, multicultural education is undergoing increased scrutiny from within the ranks of its own supporters. Even though there is evidence that multicultural education has had 1) a positive impact on curriculum, 2) on teachers' understanding of students from diverse ethnic groups, and 3) students' acceptance of each other, the academic achievement of students from some ethnic groups still lags behind others. Some charge this is due to the fact that most of the content and experiences developed as a part of multicultural education are still biased in terms of the American middle class culture. This has to change much faster to meet the needs of our present and future students. Another criticism is that there has not been a multicultural theory of learning developed which establishes a "culture-free or culture-specific curriculum and instructional strategies forspecific groups of pupils. The theorists must provide general

principles concerning the relationship between culture and learning that are testable (Hollins, 1982)." Part of the answer lies in examining the latest research on learning styles of students in the classroom setting.

A more basic challenge as to the potential of multicultural education to bring about increased academic achievement among minority students comes from its expanding definition, purpose, and scope. Geneva Gay argues that this expansion threatens the integrity of ethnic pluralism as a viable force in education as it becomes associated with all forms of pluralism. In order to maintain its original thrust (ethnicity) and purpose, future planning will require the demonstration of the effectiveness of multiethnic education in terms of costs and student achievement. Multicultural education as it is evolving at the present offers a promise of not going backwards in achievement effort.

In the 1970's and 1980's another theory related to the academic achievement of minority students has been developed by a group of educators and social scientists who, like the cultural-difference proponents, reject the arguments of the geneticists and those who believe that schools have little impact on the achievement of students. This theory is embodied in what is called the "effective schools" research. One of the leading researchers in this area was the late Ronald Edmonds, Professor of Education at Michigan State University. According to Edmonds an effective school is defined as one that "'brings an equal percentage of its highest and lowest social classes to minimum mastery.'" For the purpose of identifying the characteristics

correlated with effectiveness, schools which produced the desired results were identified and then observations were conducted to identify what they were doing that other schools were not doing.

As a result of this research five characteristics of effective schools have been identified. These include 1) leadership which focuses on the identification and diagnosis of instructional problems; 2) purposes which are clearly defined and recognized; 3) a safe and orderly environment; 4) high expectations for all students; and 5) regular monitoring by standardized tests. Edmonds admitted that the fifth characteristic was the most controversial because standardized tests do not completely measure the ends of education; however, he insisted that at this time they are "the most realistic, accurate, and equitable basis for portraying individual pupil progress (Brandt, 1982)."

The effective school research has served as a basis for school improvement programs in New York City, Milwaukee, and Chicago among others. The underlying assumption in all of these programs is the belief that "all school-age children are educable and that their educability derives from the nature of the schools to which they are sent (Edmonds, 1982)." However, the fundamental research issue yet to be resolved is whether the school effectiveness characteristics are causal as well as correlational (Brandt, 1982). Preliminary data suggests that this is the case.

After almost thirty years of research related to the issue of why Black-American students as well as other minority students

lag behind white students in terms of their achievement in school, the causes and solutions have yet to be fully resolved. The hypotheses and research have been inconclusive as well as contradictory; however, James Banks makes a vital point when he states that the hypotheses chosen to guide the education of minority students must reflect the American values of equality, justice, and human dignity (Banks, 1983). We are on the right bridge and traveling down a road that has detours, potholes, and sand. But we will stop on this road and pick up the "sand" for true grit and avoid the potholes.

Providing educational equality for all students and in turn finding ways to improve the achievement of minority students is a long developmental process. Research in this area must continue to be supported while educators continue to use the best of the programs which have been initiated in the past. At this point the best possibilities for improving the education of minority students seem to be in the area of multicultural education and in the effective schools improvement projects. Hopefully, the supporters of both programs can find ways to work together and not be in competition with each other. Their common assumptions that all students can learn and that schools do play an important role in the educational achievement of students should make this possible.

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